

READING CULTURAL TRAITS IN MANJU KAPUR'S NOVEL, "THE IMMIGRANT"

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ABSTRACT

We develop the invisible (virtual) world of particular culture around us and knowingly or unknowingly these cultural traits become the governing factors of our life. We grow with the native culture of our country. Our thoughts, emotional shades, selection of language, food habits, beliefs and hopes are developed through the cultural injections into our mind. However, the mind dazzling revolution in the sphere of economics, science and technology has brought the nations so close to each other that the collision and assimilation of different cultures became unavoidable and this phenomena has resulted into the birth of terms like diasporas, quest for identity, east-west encounter on the canon of world literature.

The present paper aims to probe into the question- what happens if we are forced to live in the midst of two different cultures with reference to Manju Kapur's novel "Immigrant". It strives to explore the peculiarity of how the inner personality of Anand and Nina, the protagonists of the novel wear the Indian culture but are forced to wear alien culture on their external personality. They are exposed to the cultural battle, one (alien culture) is striking the blows outwardly and the other one (native culture) is providing resistance to the former, eventually, yielding to it due to the socio-economic and political intervention into the battle.

KEYWORDS: Alien Culture, Cultural Traits, External Personality, Internal Personality, Etc.

INTRODUCTION

Culture marks the territory of a person within which one swims with much ease and comfort, choosing the amiable tides of cultural sea. In other words culture offers a typical situation to human beings the flexibility into the strictness. Even in one particular culture, one personality differs to others. It is mainly because his culture allows him the flexibility in shaping his beliefs feelings, knowledge different from others but at the same time, imposes the strictness on the larger scale of cultural traits of particular nation. This results into national culture like Indian culture or American culture. Thus, culture encompasses macro process and deals specifically with values and norms that govern and organize a group of people.

However, the wheels of human civilization is moving so rapidly that it becomes obligatory for its components (human beings) to leave their marked territory and enter into the new territory, facing the unknown, unusual tides and undercurrents of cultural sea. The nations are brought closer and closer due to the revolutionary development in the field of science and technology. This makes the collision and assimilation of different cultures unavoidable.

It is the greatest characteristic of literature that it presents the subtlety of human activity. It deals with those aspects of human life which are remained untouched by the other genre of knowledge based on the spirit of rationalization. Literature especially novels present human beings with vivid colours of environment and culture. "Literature itself is an integral part of a culture and has its own complex relationship to the rest of cultural setting." (Rosenblatt M., p.461) Manju Kapur is one novelist among many who has portrayed the cultural existence of human beings. She captures very effectively the situation in which one culture is trying to find its place into the territory of other culture in the novel, "The Immigrant". The novel became instantly popular among the books of immigrant category. The novel is the effective unfolding of the question- what happens if we are forced to live in the midst of two different cultures. The protagonists, Ananda Sharma and Nina Sharma are caught in the dilemma about their native culture and alien culture. Manju Kapur is intelligent enough to show how each blow of alien culture reduces the hold of native culture upon the protagonists.

CULTURE AND PERSONALITY

Culture is a key determinant of what it means to be a person. Personality can be defined simply as the distinctive way a person thinks, feels and behaves. D. Funder described personality as "individual characteristic pattern of thoughts, emotions and behaviour together with psychological mechanism-hidden or not behind those pattern" (p.1-2) Right from our childhood, we are influenced by the cultural phenomena of particular society. Our lifestyle, thoughts and emotional shades, selection of language, food habits, beliefs and hopes are developed through the cultural injection into our mind. We become the embodiment of abstract notion of culture. Culture is a fertile soil to the development of the personality. It provides the context in which the personality derives its characteristics and constant progress. In regard to culture, Kluckhohn says "...culture is to society what memory is to individuals."(p.955) Culture consists of shared meaning system, that provide the standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share equal language, a historic period and a geographic location. However, what happens if the system of meaning does not share equal language, a historic period and geographical location? What happens when a person possessing certain system of meaning, immigrating to the alien geographical location? These questions can be explored with the cross cultural approach. The present paper strives to explore the peculiarity of how the inner personality of Nina and Ananda, the protagonist of the novel, 'The Immigrant' wear Indian culture but are forced to wear alien culture on their external appearance. They are exposed to the cultural battle, one (alien culture) is striking the blow outwardly and the other one (native culture) is providing resistance to the former, eventually, yielding to it due to the socio, economic and political intervention into the battle.

CULTURAL BATTLE

The novel The Immigrant is a battle ground on which two different cultures- Indian and Canadian try their arms. Among the many dimensions of culture, collectivism and individualism are prominent. In collectivist culture people are inter dependent with their in-groups (family, tribe, nation etc), giving priority to the goals of their in-groups, shaping their behavior primarily on the basis of in-group norms and behave in communal way. (Mills and Clark, p.121-144) India, being collectivist in culture is "traditionalist and emphasize in group cohesion, respect for in-group norms, and the directives of authorities." (Bond and Smith, p.205-35) A defining characteristics of people in collectivist culture is their notable concern with relations. All the Indian characters in the novel show the concern for relation. Ananda cares much of his parents, He is devoted and parent loving child whose ambition is "...to make money, to look after his parents and repay them for the time, love and hope they had invested in him." (The Immigrant, p 12) Nina also thinks much about her mother. She cares her lot

and feels very sorry when she goes through her memories after her death. She keeps relation whole heartedly with Xenobia. Ananda's uncle shows concern for relation when he takes the responsibility of his nephew. Even, Ananda's sister is much sensitive with relations and devotes herself to settle her brother down with marriage.

Individualism is the other pole of collectivism. Canada is the best example of individualist culture. "In such culture competitiveness is high and one must be 'the best' in order to climb hierarchy." (Triandis and Suh, p.140) It becomes obvious when Ananda is forced to learn the dentistry again in Halifax to match the standards of Canada. Ananda's feeling of belongingness is wiped out when he hears about the loan towards the expenses of his education. He realizes that "...this was not a world where family sacrificed their all for your success; here blood expected you to stand on your own." (The Immigrant, p. 24) He confronts changes in relations. He is asked to do things like preparing breakfast, arranging own bed, cleaning the toilet for himself. He became isolated with no relatives to take care of him. He feels "...alone, all alone, with relatives who did not wake with the fall of his feet on the floor, the blood that joined them diluted with waters of an ocean." (The Immigrant, p. 19) Nina also loses her identity as lecturer because in Canada one must be PhD to take a teaching career.

The emotions experienced by collectivist and individualist cultural members appear to be different. Canadians have disengaged emotions like superior, proud and top of the world whereas the Indians have interpersonally engaged emotions of friendly feelings, feel close and respects. Ananda and Nina in the novel, initially show the Indian cultural traits of attentiveness, respectfulness, humility and cooperativeness in their personality. However, as the novel progresses, we witness in Ananda's and Nina's personality the Canadian cultural traits of independent, pleasure-seeking and assertiveness, represented by the Canadian like Sue, Galler, Mandy and Anton.

"People in collectivist culture usually establish intimate and long term relationships" (Verma J., p.157) through the bonds of marriage. Ananda and Nina have come together through such a bond. Gradually, they forsake this culture and enter into the individualistic culture of Canada in establishing non-intimate and short-term relationships with Sue and Mandy and with Anton respectively. According to Rozin, "there are three moral codes: community code, autonomy code and divinity code." (p.125) Community code and divinity code are important to people in collectivist culture like India. Remaining faithful of husband and wife with each other is associated both with community code and divinity code. Ananda and Nina both fail to fulfill these codes and violating them, on the contrary follows the autonomy code of Canadian culture. Ananda keeps sexual affairs with Sue and Mandy to explore 'white body' and in the similar way Nina commits adultery after having sex with Anton. "For the first time she had a sense of her own self, entirely separate from other people, autonomous, independent. So strange that the sex did not make her feel guilty, not beyond the initial shock." (The Immigrant, p.260) Anton is the embodiment of western culture. He deceives his wife but he doesn't regret because according to him "...it's stupid to confine yourself to one person for your whole life. Nobody owns anybody..." (The Immigrant, p.258). On the other hand, Nina has her own justification in hiding her adultery. Manju Kapur writes "Who can feel guilty about living ? Judging from the evidence and sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their inalienable right. It was her right too." (The Immigrant, p.260).

Among other community and divinity codes, wearing traditional dress and remaining aloof from flesh eating are characteristics of Indian culture. Both Ananda and Nina are the representatives of Indian culture who were traditionalist in wearing and food habits. However Ananda becomes Canadian in attitude. He tells Nina, "Here I'm thought of as a cultured man, as Canadian as everybody else. So I don't want folks to get the wrong impression." (The Immigrant, p.147) He

changes his name from Anand to Andy. He becomes non-vegetarian, believing in the philosophy “When in Rome do what Romans do.” (The Immigrant, p.133) He desires to forsake everything that reminds him of his origin. His process of becoming westernized is started with consuming alcohol, a prohibited item for a son in every Indian family. His every move towards new personality is accompanied with rational arguments; “How long could one hang on to caste taboos, for whom and for what?” (The Immigrant, p.32) “He was of the opinion that when one came to a new country, one had to come wholeheartedly, otherwise one could be miserable. So he had changed everything Indian about him as much as he could do. Name, habits, dress, food etc. and with each such successive move he felt liberated.” (Mitra and Dubey, p.7) Similarly Nina after much struggle gives yield to wearing western cloths and gradually becomes alcoholic and non-vegetarian. “In Halifax her vegetarianism was treated respectfully, as part of her beliefs, but she felt false every time she concurred with a picture of herself as a traditional, devout Hindu. Really, what did she care about a religion she never practiced? After she had had sex with Anton, it seemed especially hypocritical to hang on to vegetables.” (The Immigrant, p.266)

In this way, the novel ‘The Immigrant’ presents the panorama of collision and assimilation of Indian and Canadian culture. When Ananda and Nina are forced to live in the midst of two cultures—one inherent and the other surrounded as a result of migration, the first question that strikes them – whether he/she must be dependent or independent? Their inherent personality, so far, had habituated them to be dependent on the family where the sense of belongingness flows as full as river. However, the socio-economic structure of alien culture demands to be independent. Therefore Ananda is asked to prepare his own breakfast, arrange his own bed, clean the toilet, repay the loan he has taken for education and finally he is asked to be alone. Nina Sharma also accepts the role of dependent on her husband but cultural change forces her to be independent. She takes admission for library Science course, joins women activity group, and finally she leaves her husband to be independent. She says, “When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family.” (The Immigrant, p.330)

Another predicament they face is that they are tossed between two divergent cultural dimensions- whether to cherish a relation for long time as it is done in India or to keep non-intimate, disengaged, short time relation with people around them? The Canadian society based on the spirit of individualism follows the maxim- “Nobody owns anybody.” Therefore, Ananda and Nina keep emotionally disengaged and short time relationships with others in their life. Canada is the developed country where one should be ‘best’ to gain recognition and identity. Ananda realizes this and tries hard to be ‘best’ -in education, in behavior, in habits and in attitude. Nina also, after much struggle learns the lessons of modernism in Halifax. Religion is another factor that exercises overwhelming influence over the Indian personality. Ananda and Nina are brought up on the lines of religious austerity. But their moving to the alien land has asked them to shun their religiosity. They do this by eating meat, refusing to keep fast and committing adultery.

Indian culture stands unique for its attire. Nina immigrates to Canada with lots of saris but she could not wear them due to the current societal demands. She starts wearing jeans and shirts. Thus the novel throws Ananda and Nina into a battle ground where two different cultures try their arms through their personality. Their inner personality comes in conflicts with the external happenings as an outcome of socio-economic and political structures of Canada. This compels them to accept and incorporate these external happenings in their personality, but their acceptance and incorporation of these external happenings are not altogether rather it is as Manju Kapur says, “These immigrants are always in two minds. Outwardly they adjust well. Educated and English speaking, they allow misleading assumptions about a heart that is

divided."(The Immigrant, p.120)

CONCLUSIONS

Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* gives us the empirical experience of the phenomena of personality change, the process involving many shades of conflicts and resistance. The novelist appropriately captured the predicament of the characters that are forced to live in the midst of two different cultures. Both Ananda Sharma and Nina Sharma are Indian by blood and flesh but, as the novel develops, we see them attempting to incorporate the Canadian traits into their personality. The central characters of the novels exhibit the signs of Indianess but they are compelled to wear alien culture on their external personality. They show resistance to this cultural invasion but it proves futile since the socio-economic and political factors favor the alien culture. Feeling helpless against each blow of alien culture, they yield to it and embrace the philosophy- 'When in Rome do what Romans do.'

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